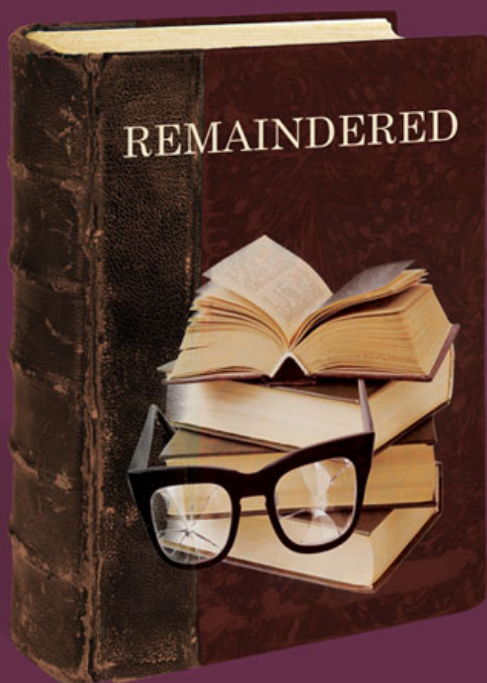
A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK

PETER LOVESEY



BIBLIO**MYSTERIES** | Short Tales about Deadly Books

Remaindered

Peter Lovesey

MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM

*A*GATHA CHRISTIE DID IT. The evidence was plain to see, but no one *did* see for more than a day. Robert Ripple's corpse was cold on the bookshop floor. It must have been there right through Monday, the day Precious Finds was always closed. Poor guy, he was discovered early Tuesday in the section he called his office, in a position no bookseller would choose for his last transaction, face down, feet down and butt up, jack-knifed over a carton of books. The side of the carton had burst and some of the books had slipped out and fanned across the carpet, every one a Christie.

Late Sunday Robert had taken delivery of the Christie novels. They came from a house on Park Avenue, one of the best streets in Poketown, Pennsylvania, and they had a curious history. They were brought over from England before World War II by an immigrant whose first job had been as a London publisher's rep. He'd kept the books as a souvenir of those tough times trying to interest bookshop owners in whodunits when the only novels most British people wanted to read were by Jeffrey Farnol and Ethel M. Dell. After his arrival in America, he'd switched to selling Model T Fords instead and made a sizeable fortune. The Christies had been forgotten about, stored in the attic of the fine old weatherboard house he'd bought after making his first million. And now his playboy grandson planned to demolish the building and replace it with a space-age dwelling of glass and concrete. He'd cleared the attic and wanted to dispose of the books. Robert had taken one look and offered five hundred dollars for the lot. The grandson had pocketed the check and gone away pleased with the deal.

Hardly believing his luck, Robert must have waited until the shop closed and then stooped to lift the carton onto his desk and check the contents more carefully.

Mistake.

Hardcover books are heavy. He had spent years humping books around, but he was sixty-eight, with a heart condition, and this was one box too many.

Against all the odds, Robert had stayed in business for twenty-six years, dealing in used books of all kinds. But Precious Finds had become more than a bookshop. It was a haven of civilized life in Poketown, a center for all manner of small town activities—readers' groups, a writers' circle, coffee mornings and musical evenings. Some of the locals came and went without even glancing at the bookshelves. A few bought books or donated them out of loyalty, but it was difficult to understand how Robert had kept going so long. It was said he did most of his business at the beginning through postal sales and later on the Internet.

Robert's sudden death created problems all round. Tanya Tripp, the bookshop assistant, who had been in the job only a few months, had the nasty shock of discovering the body, and found herself burdened with dealing with the emergency, first calling a doctor, then an undertaker and then attempting to contact Robert's family. Without success. Not a Ripple remained. He had never married. It became obvious that his loyal customers would have to arrange the funeral. Someone had to take charge, and this was Tanya. Fortunately she was a capable young woman, as sturdy in character as she was in figure. She didn't complain about the extra workload, even to herself.

Although all agreed that the effort of lifting the Agatha Christies had been the

cause of death, an autopsy was inescapable.The medical examiner found severe bruising to the head and this was attributed to the fall. A coronary had killed Robert.

Simple.

The complications came after. Tanya was unable to find a will. She searched the office where Robert had died, as well as his apartment upstairs, where she had never ventured before. Being the first to enter a dead man's rooms would have spooked the average person. Tanya was above average in confidence and determination. She wasn't spooked. She found Robert's passport, birth certificate and tax returns, but nothing resembling a will. She checked with his bank and they didn't have it.

Meanwhile one of the richest customers offered to pay for the funeral and the regulars clubbed together to arrange a wake at Precious Finds. The feeling was that Robert would have wished for a spirited send-off.

The back room had long been the venue for meetings. The books in there were not considered valuable. Every second-hand bookshop has to cope with items that are never likely to sell: thrillers that no longer thrill, sci-fi that has been overtaken by real science and romance too coy for modern tastes. The obvious solution is to refuse such books, but sometimes they come in a job lot with things of more potential such as nineteenth century magazines containing engravings that can be cut out, mounted and sold as prints.Robert's remedy had been to keep the dross in the back room. The heaviest volumes were at floor level, outdated encyclopedias, dictionaries and art books. Higher up were the condensed novels and book club editions of long-forgotten authors. Above them, privately published fiction and poetry. On the top, fat paperbacks turning brown and curling at the edges, whole sets of Michener, Hailey, and Clavell.

The saving grace of the back room was that the shelves in the center were mounted on wheels and could be rolled aside to create a useful space for meetings. A stack of chairs stood in one corner. Robert made no charge, pleased to have people coming right through the shop and possibly pausing to look at the desirable items shelved in the front rooms. So on Tuesdays the bookshop hosted the Poketown history society, Wednesdays the art club, Thursdays, the chess players. Something each afternoon and every night except Sundays and Mondays.

And now the back room was to be used for the wake.

The music appreciation group knew of an Irish fiddler who brought along four friends, and they set about restoring everyone's spirits after the funeral. The place was crowded out. The event spilled over into the other parts of the shop.

It was a bitter-sweet occasion. The music was lively and there was plenty of cheap wine, but there was still anxiety about what would happen after. For the time being the shop had stayed open under Tanya's management. There was no confidence that this could continue.

"It has to be sold," Tanya said in a break between jigs. "There's no heir."

"Who's going to buy a bookstore in these difficult times?" George Digby-Smith asked. He was one of the Friends of England, who met here on occasional Friday nights, allegedly to talk about cricket and cream teas and other English indulgences. Actually, George was more than just a friend of England. He'd been born there sixty years ago. "Someone will want to throw out all the books and turn the building into apartments."

“Over my dead body,” Myrtle Rafferty, another of the Friends of England, piped up.

“We don’t need another fatality, thank you,” George said.

“We can’t sit back and do nothing. We all depend on this place.”

“Get real, people,” one of the Wednesday morning coffee group said. “None of us could take the business on, even if we had the funds.”

“Tanya knows about books,” George said at once. “She’ll be out of a job if the store closes. What do you say, Tanya?”

The young woman looked startled. It was only a few months since she had walked in one morning and asked if Robert would take her on as his assistant. In truth, he’d badly needed some help and she’d earned every cent he paid. Softly spoken, almost certainly under thirty, she had been a quiet presence in the shop, putting more order into the displays, but leaving Robert to deal with the customers.

“I couldn’t possibly buy it.”

“I’m not suggesting you do. But you could manage it. In fact, you’d do a far better job than old Robert ever did.”

“That’s unkind,” Myrtle said.

George turned redder than usual. “Yes, it was.”

“We are all in debt to Robert,” Myrtle said.

“Rest his soul,” George agreed, raising his glass. “To Robert, a bookman to the end, gone, but not forgotten. In the best sense of the word, remaindered.”

“What’s that meant to mean?”

“Passed on, but still out there somewhere.”

“More like boxed and posted,” the man from the coffee club murmured. “Or pulped.”

Myrtle hadn’t heard. She was thinking positively. “Tanya didn’t altogether turn down George’s suggestion. She’d want to continue, given the opportunity.”

Tanya was silent.

“When someone dies without leaving a will, what happens?” George asked.

Ivor Ciplinsky, who knew a bit about law, and led the history society, said, “An administrator will have to be appointed and they’ll make extensive efforts to trace a relative, however distant.”

“I already tried,” Tanya said. “There isn’t anyone.”

“Cousins, second cousins, second cousins once removed.”

“Nobody.”

Myrtle asked Ivor, “And if no relative is found?”

“Then the property escheats to the state’s coffers.”

“It *what*?”

“Escheats. A legal term, meaning it reverts to the state by default.”

“What a ghastly-sounding word,” George said.

“Ghastly to think about,” Myrtle said. “Our beloved bookshop grabbed by the bureaucrats.”

“It goes back to feudal law,” Ivor said.

“It should have stayed there,” Myrtle said. “Escheating. Cheating comes into it, for sure. Cheating decent people out of their innocent pleasures. We can’t allow that. Precious Finds is the focus of our community.”

“If you’re about to suggest we club together and buy it, don’t,” Ivor said.

“Paying for a wake is one thing. You won’t get a bunch of customers, however friendly, taking on a business as precarious as this. You can count me out straight away.”

“So speaks the history society,” Myrtle said with a sniff. “Caving in before the battle even begins. Well, the Friends of England are made of sterner stuff. The English stood firm at Agincourt, a famous battle six hundred years ago, in case you haven’t covered it on Tuesday evenings, Ivor. Remember who faced off the Spanish Armada.”

“Not to mention Wellington at Waterloo and Nelson at Trafalgar,” George added.

“Michael Caine,” Edward said. He was the third member of the Friends of England.

There were some puzzled frowns. Then George said, “*Zulu*—the movie. You’re thinking of the battle of ‘Rorke’s Drift.’”

“The Battle of Britain,” Myrtle finished on a high, triumphant note.

“Who *are* these people?” the coffee club man asked.

It was a good question. Myrtle, George and Edward had been meeting in the back room on occasional Friday nights for longer than anyone could recall. They must have approached Robert at some point and asked if they could have their meetings there. An Anglophile himself, at least as far as books were concerned, Robert wouldn’t have turned them away. But nobody else had ever joined the three in their little club. This was because they didn’t announce their meetings in advance. If you weren’t told which Fridays they met, you couldn’t be there, even if you adored England, drank warm beer and ate nothing but roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

George was the only one of the three with a genuine English connection. You wouldn’t have known it from his appearance. He’d come over as a youth in the late sixties, a hippie with flowers in his hair and weed in his backpack, living proof of that song about San Francisco. In middle age he’d given up the flowers, but not the weed. However, he still had the long hair, now silver and worn in a ponytail, and his faded T-shirts and torn jeans remained faintly psychedelic.

Edward, by contrast, dressed the part of the English gent, in blue blazer, white shirt and cravat and nicely ironed trousers. He had a David Niven pencil mustache and dark-tinted crinkly hair with a parting. Only when he spoke would you have guessed he’d been born and raised in the Bronx.

Myrtle, too, was New York born and bred. She colored her hair and it was currently orange and a mass of loose curls. She had a face and figure she was proud of. Back in the nineties, her good looks had reeled in her second husband, Butch Rafferty, a one-time gangster, who had treated her to diamond necklaces and dinners at the best New York restaurants. Tragically, Butch had been gunned down in 2003 by Gritty Bologna, a rival hood he had made the mistake of linking up with. The widowed Myrtle had quit gangland and moved out here to Pennsylvania. She wasn’t destitute. She still lived in some style in a large colonial house at the better end of town. No one could fathom her affiliation to the old country except there was not much doubt that she slept (separately) with George and Edward. She had travelled to England a number of times with each of them. Either they were not jealous of each other or she controlled the relationship with amazing skill.

Little was known of what went on at the Friends of England meetings in the bookshop. Comfortable and cozy as the back room was, it was not furnished for middle-aged sex. Tanya, understandably curious, had questioned Robert closely about how the Friends passed their evenings. He'd said he assumed they spent their time looking at travel brochures and planning their next trip. The meetings did seem to be followed quite soon after by visits to England, always involving Myrtle, usually in combination with one or other of her fellow Friends.

The three were now in a huddle at the far end of the back room, where they always gathered for their meetings and where—appropriately—three out-of-date sets of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* took up the entire bottom shelf.

"If the shop is … what was that word?" Edward said when the music once more calmed down enough for conversation.

"Escheated."

"If that happens, they'll want a quick sale and we're in deep shit."

"But there's a precious window of opportunity before it gets to that stage," George said. "They have to make completely sure no one has a claim on the estate and that can't be done overnight. We need to get organized. Myrtle was talking about a trip to the Cotswolds before the end of the month. Sorry, my friends, but I think we must cancel."

"Shucks," Myrtle said. "I was counting the days to that trip. You figure we should stay here and do something?"

"We can't do nothing."

"Do what?" Edward said, and it was clear from his disenchanted tone that it had been his turn to partner Myrtle to England.

George glanced right and left and then lowered his voice. "I have an idea, a rather bold idea, but this is not the time or the place."

"Shall we call a meeting?" Myrtle said, eager to hear more. "How about this Friday? We don't need Robert's permission anymore."

"In courtesy, we ought to mention it to Tanya," George said.

"Tell her your idea?"

"Heavens, no. Just say we need a meeting, so she can book us in."

On Friday they had the back room to themselves. Tanya was in the office at the front end of the shop and there were no browsers. The footfall in Precious Finds had decreased markedly after Robert's death had been written up in the *Poketown Observer*.

Even Edward, still sore that his trip to the Cotswolds with Myrtle had been cancelled, had to agree that George's plan was smart.

"It's not just smart, it's genius," Myrtle said. "We can save the shop and carry on as before." She leaned back in her chair and caressed the spines of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. "The Friends of England can go on indefinitely."

"For as long as the funds hold up, at any rate," George said. "We've been sensible up to now. Let's keep it like that."

George had to be respected. His wise, restraining advice had allowed the three of them to enjoy a comfortable retirement that might yet continue. If the truth were told, the Friends of England Society was a mutual benefit club. George and Edward had once been members of Butch Rafferty's gang and they were still living off the spoils of a security van heist.

“My dear old Butch would love this plan,” Myrtle said with a faraway look. “I can hear him saying, ‘Simple ain’t always obvious.’”

“If Butch hadn’t messed up, we wouldn’t be here,” Edward said, still moody. “We’d be back in New York City, living in style.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Myrtle said. “You’d have gambled away your share inside six months. New York, maybe—but by now you’d be sleeping rough in Central Park. I know you better than you know yourself, Edward.”

“There are worse places than Central Park,” he said. “I’ve had it up to here with Poketown, Pennsylvania. We should have got outta here years ago.”

“Oh, come on.”

“It’s only because we live in Pennsylvania that my plan will work,” George said.

Edward’s lip curled. “It had better work.”

“And I’m thinking we should bring Tanya in at an early stage,” George said.

“No way,” Edward said. “What is it with Tanya? You got something going with her?”

“How ridiculous. You’re the one who can’t keep his eyes off her.”

Myrtle said, “Leave it, George. Act your age, both of you. I’m with Edward here. Keep it to ourselves.”

Edward almost purred. “Something else Butch once said: ‘The more snouts in the trough, the less you get.’”

“As you wish,” George said. “We won’t say anything to Tanya. She’ll get a beautiful surprise.”

“So how do we divide the work?” Myrtle said.

“Unless you think otherwise, I volunteer to do the paperwork,” George said. “I’m comfortable with the English language.”

“Keep it short and simple. Nothing fancy.”

“Is that agreed, then?”

Edward agreed with a shrug.

“But we should all join in,” Myrtle said.“Another thing Butch said, ‘Everyone must get their hands dirty.’”

“Suits me—but what else is there to do?” Edward said.

“I need one of Robert’s credit cards,” George said.

Edward shook his head. “The hell you do. We’re not going down that route. That’s a sure way to get found out.”

George took a sharp, impatient breath. “We won’t be using it to buy stuff.”

“So what do we want it for?” Edward said, and immediately knew the answer. “The signature on the back.”

“Right,” Myrtle said. “Can you take care of that?”

“Tricky,” Edward said.

“Not at all. Robert must have used plastic. Everyone does.”

“How do we get hold of one?”

“How do *you* get hold of one,” Myrtle said. “That’s how you get your hands dirty. My guess is they’re still lying around the office somewhere.”

“Tanya’s always in there.”

Myrtle rolled her eyes. “God help us, Edward, if you can’t find a way to do this simple thing you don’t deserve to be one of us.”

George, becoming the diplomat, said, “Come on, old friend, it’s no hardship

chatting up Tanya. You can't keep your eyes off her ample backside."

Myrtle said at once. "Cut that out, George." She turned to Edward. "Get her out of the office on some pretext and have a nose around."

"It's not as if you're robbing the Bank of England," George said.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do," Edward said without much grace, and then turned to Myrtle. "And how will you get your hands dirty?"

"Me? I'm going to choose the perfect place to plant the thing."

Almost overnight, Tanya had been transformed from bookshop assistant to manager of Robert's estate as well as his shop. It wasn't her choice, but there was no one else to step into the breach. At least she continued to be employed. She decided she would carry on until someone in authority instructed her to stop. She would allow the shop to remain open and operate on a cash only basis, buying no new stock and keeping accurate accounts. She couldn't touch the bank account, but there was money left in the till and there were occasional sales.

Meanwhile she did her best to get some order out of the chaos that had been Robert's office. He had given up on the filing system years ago. She spent days sorting through papers, getting up to date with correspondence and informing clients what had happened. Someone at some point would have to make an inventory of the stock. What a task *that* would be. Nothing was on computer, not even the accounts. He had still been using tear-out receipt books with carbon sheets.

She glanced across the room at the carton of Agatha Christies that had been the death of poor Robert. After his body had been taken away she had repaired the carton with sticky tape, replaced the loose books and slid the heavy load alongside the filing cabinet. She really ought to shelve them in the mystery section in the next room. But then she wasn't certain how to price them. Robert had paid five hundred for them, so they weren't cheap editions. The copy of the invoice was in one of the boxes. The titles weren't listed there. It simply read: *Agatha Christie novels as agreed.*

She went over and picked up *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the author's first novel, obviously in good condition and still in its dust jacket. A first edition would be worth a lot, but she told herself this must be a second printing or a facsimile. It was easy to be fooled into thinking you'd found a gem. According to the spine the publisher was the Bodley Head, so this copy had been published in England. Yet when she looked inside at the publication details and the 1921 date, she couldn't see any evidence that the book was anything except a genuine first edition. It had the smell of an old book, yet it was as clean as if it had not been handled much.

Was it possible?

She was still learning the business, but her heart beat a little faster. Robert himself had once told her that early Agatha Christies in jackets were notoriously rare because booksellers in the past were in the habit of stripping the books of their paper coverings at the point of sale to display the cloth bindings.

Among the reference works lining the office back wall were some that listed auction prices. She took one down, thumbed through to the right page, and saw that a 1921 Bodley Head first edition *without* its original dust jacket had sold last year for just over ten thousand dollars. No one seemed to have auctioned a copy

in its jacket in the past fifty years.

She handled the book with more respect and looked again at the page with the date. This had to be a genuine first edition.

"Oh my God!" she said aloud.

No wonder Robert had snapped up the collection. This volume alone was worth many times the price he had paid for them all. He was sharp enough to spot a bargain, which was why the Christie collection had so excited him. It was easy to imagine his emotional state here in the office that Sunday evening. His unhealthy heart must have been under intolerable strain.

The find of a lifetime had triggered the end of a lifetime.

And now Tanya wondered about her own heart. She had a rock band playing in her chest.

If a copy without its jacket fetched ten grand, how much was this little beauty worth? Surely enough to cover her every need for months, if not years, to come.

So tempting.

Robert had never trusted the computer. He'd used it as a glorified typewriter and little else. His contact details for his main customers were kept in a card index that Tanya now flicked through, looking for wealthy people interested in what Robert had called 'British Golden Age mysteries'. She picked out five names. On each card were noted the deals he had done and the prices paid for early editions of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Anthony Berkeley. They weren't five figure sums, but the books almost certainly hadn't been such fine copies as these.

It wouldn't hurt to phone some of these customers and ask if they would be interested in making an offer for a 1921 Bodley Head first edition of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*—with a dust jacket.

"I'd need to see it," the first voice said, plainly trying to sound laid back. Then gave himself away by adding, "You haven't even told me who you are. Where are you calling from? I don't mind getting on a plane."

Tanya was cautious. "In fairness, I need to speak to some other potential buyers."

"How much do you have in mind?" he said. "I can arrange a transfer into any account you care to name and no questions asked. Tell me the price you want."

Collecting can be addictive.

"It's not decided yet," she said. "This is just an enquiry to find out who is interested. As I said, I have other calls to make."

"Are you planning to auction it, or what?"

"I'm not going through an auctioneer. It would be a private sale, but at some point I may ask for your best offer."

"You say it has the original jacket? Is it complete? Sometimes they come with a panel detached or missing."

"Believe me, it's complete."

There was a pause at the end of the line. Then: "I'd be willing to offer a six figure sum. If I can examine it for staining and so on and you tell me the provenance, I could run to more than that."

A six figure sum? Did he really mean that?

"Thank you," Tanya succeeded in saying in a small, shocked voice. "I must make some more calls now."

“Screw it, a hundred and twenty grand.”

She swallowed hard. “I’m not yet accepting offers, but I may come back to you.”

“One forty.” He was terrified to put the phone down.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Tanya said, and closed the call.

She tried a second collector of Golden Age mysteries and this one wasn’t interested in staining or provenance. He couldn’t contain his excitement. “Lady, name your price,” he said. “I’d kill for that book.” Without any prompting, he offered a hundred and fifty thousand, “In used banknotes, if you want.”

She didn’t bother to call the others. She needed to collect her thoughts. Robert’s sudden death had come as such a shock that no one else had given a thought to the value of the Agatha Christies. She was the only person in Poketown with the faintest idea and she could scarcely believe what she’d been offered. Could the existence of a dust jacket—a sheet of paper printed on one side—really mean a mark-up of more than a hundred grand?

She lifted more books out, first editions all. *The Murder on the Links, The Secret of Chimneys* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The beauty of this was that there was no written evidence of how many were in the carton. The invoice had lumped them all together. *Agatha Christie novels as agreed.* She could take a dozen home and no one would be any the wiser. But she would be richer. Unbelievably richer.

Her time as stand-in manager would soon end.There was already talk of an administrator being appointed.

The phone on the desk buzzed. She jerked in surprise. Guiltily, as if someone was in the room with her, she turned the books face down and covered them with her arm.

“Miss Tripp?”

“Speaking.”

“Al Johnson here, from the bank, about the late Mr. Ripple’s estate.”

She repeated automatically, “Mr. Ripple’s estate.”

“You were planning a further search for his will when we last spoke. I guess you’d have called me if you’d been successful.”

“I guess.”

“Are you okay, Miss Tripp? You sound a little distracted.”

“There’s a lot going on,” she said. “Sorry. You asked about the will. It didn’t turn up. I looked everywhere I could think of.”

“How long has it been now—five weeks? I think we’re fast approaching the point of assuming he died intestate.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Neglecting to provide for one’s death is not as unusual as you might suppose, even among the elderly. The law is quite straightforward here in Pennsylvania. We get an administrator appointed and he or she will calculate the total assets and make a search for relatives who may inherit.”

She made a huge effort not to think about the Agatha Christies. “I tried to contact the family before the funeral, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone left. He was unmarried, as you know, and had no brothers or sisters. I couldn’t even trace any cousins.”

“If that’s really so, then the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will collect.

Robert's main asset was the bookshop and his apartment upstairs, of course. Do you have other plans yet?"

"Plans?" Sure, she had plans, but this wasn't the moment to speak about them.

"To move on, get another job."

"Not really. How long have I got?"

"In the shop? About a week, I'd say. It's up to me to ask for the administrator to take over and there's usually no delay over that. Everything is then put on hold."

"We have to close?"

"Between you and me, you should have closed already, but I turned a blind eye, knowing what a blow this will be for our community."

After the call, Tanya reached for a Precious Finds tote-bag and filled it with Agatha Christie firsts. She couldn't help the community, but she'd be crazy if she didn't help herself.

Edward, the David Niven lookalike from the Friends of England, was waiting outside the office door, immaculate as always, a carnation in his lapel, when Tanya unlocked next morning. He held a coffee cup in each hand.

"Howya doin?" The charm suffered when he opened his mouth.

"Pretty good," she said, and meant it. "But it's looking bad for the shop. I think we'll be in administration by the end of the week." She was trying to sound concerned.

"Soon as that? Too bad." Strangely, Edward didn't sound over-worried either. "I picked up a coffee for you, Tanya. Skinny latte without syrup, in a tall cup, right?" He handed it over.

"How did you know?"

"I was behind you in Starbucks the other morning."

"And you remembered? What a kind man you are. Why don't you come in?" She could offer no less.

He looked around for a chair but there wasn't a spare one, so he stood his coffee on the filing cabinet Tanya had been trying to get back into some kind of order. He appeared to stand it there. In fact the cup tipped over, the lid shot off and his black Americano streamed down the side of the metal cabinet.

Tanya screamed, "Ferchrissake!" She grabbed some Kleenex from the box on her desk and moved fast.

"No sweat," Edward said after rapidly checking his clothes. "Missed me."

She was on her knees, dragging the remaining Agatha Christies away from the still dripping coffee, her voice shrill in panic. "It's all over the books."

He stepped around the cabinet for a closer look. "Aw, shit." He pulled the pristine white handkerchief from his top pocket and sacrificed it to mop the surface of the filing cabinet. Then, seeing Tanya's frantic efforts to dry the books in the box, he stooped and began dabbing at them.

"Don't—you'll make it worse," she said.

"Are they special?"

"Special?" She felt like strangling him, the idiot. Words poured from her before she realized how much she was giving away. "They're first edition Agatha Christies, worth a fucking fortune. Help me lift them out. The coffee has ruined

most of them."

He started picking out soggy books and carrying them to her desk. "Agatha Christies, huh? And you say they're valuable?"

"They were until you—" She stopped in mid-sentence, realizing she'd said too much. She tried to roll back some of what she had revealed. "Okay, it was an accident, I know, but Robert paid five hundred dollars for these."

He whistled. "Five hundred bucks for used books? I thought people gave them away."

"Not these. Most of them are more than seventy years old and with hardly a stain on them … until now."

"You can still read them when they're dry."

Tanya sighed. The blundering fool didn't get it. He had no conception of the damage he'd done—but maybe this was a good thing. After the initial shock she was trying to calm down. They had finished emptying the carton. She told herself this could have been a far worse disaster. Fortunately the real plums of the collection were safe in her apartment. The ones she'd left were there for show, in case anyone asked about Robert's last book deal.

Edward gave another rub to the filing cabinet, as if *that* was the problem. "You tidied this place good."

"Sorting it out," she said, still shaking. "Robert wasn't the best organized person in the world."

"And you never found the will?"

"The will?" She forced herself to think about it. "Let's face it. There isn't one—which is why we don't have any future."

"Where did he keep his personal stuff?"

"All over. Birth certificate upstairs. Tax forms and credit card statements down here in the desk drawers. His bank documents were at the back of the filing cabinet."

"Driving license?"

"In the car outside on the street. I even looked there for the will."

"Credit cards?"

"A bunch of them were in a card case in his back pocket. They came back from the morgue last week. I shredded them after making a note of the numbers."

"Good thinking," Edward said, but his facial muscles went into spasm.

"So it's the end of an era here in Poketown," Tanya said and she was beginning to get a grip on herself. "What will happen to your Friends of England group? Will you be able to go somewhere else?"

Edward shook his head. "Wouldn't be the same."

"The end of the line for you, then?"

"Seems so." But he still didn't appear depressed at the prospect. He glanced at the line of sad, damp books. "I wanna find some way of saying sorry. How about lunch?"

"It's not necessary."

"After what I just did, it's the least I can do. Someone I knew used to say, 'You shoot yourself in the foot, you gotta learn to hop.'"

She managed a smile. "Okay. What time?"

They lunched at Jimmy's, the best restaurant on Main Street. By then Tanya had recovered most of her poise. After all, she had enough undamaged Agatha Christies at home to make her rich. And this tête-à-tête with Edward was as good a chance as she would get to discover the main thing she had come to Poketown to find out.

She waited until she had finished her angel-hair pasta with Thai spiced prawns—by which time Edward had gone through three glasses of Chablis.

"Now that Precious Finds is coming to an end, do you mind if I ask something?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"What exactly went on at the meetings?"

"Meetings?" he said as if he didn't understand the word. She hoped he hadn't drunk too much to make sense.

"Of the Friends. I asked Robert once, but I don't think he knew. He was pretty vague about it, in that way he had of telling you nothing."

Edward gave a guarded answer. "We don't do much except talk."

"In that case, you could talk in some other place. It's not a total disaster if the shop closes, as it will."

He seemed to be avoiding eye contact. "It's not so simple. We can't just shift camp."

"I don't understand why not."

"You don't need to."

She should have waited for him to sink a fourth glass of the wine."But you can tell me how you three got together."

"We know each other from way back, when we all lived in New York City."

"And Myrtle was married to that man who was murdered?"

He nodded. "Butch Rafferty."

"Mr. Rafferty had a hard reputation as a gang leader, didn't he? I can understand a woman being attracted to that kind of guy." She noted his eyes widen and his chest fill out. "Did you know him?"

"Did I know Butch!" Out to impress, he jutted his jaw a fraction higher.

"Closely, then?"

Edward put down his glass, made a link with his pinkies and pulled them until they turned red. "We were like that."

"Wow! They must have been dangerous times for any friend of Butch Rafferty. Is that why you moved away?"

"We didn't run," he said.

"When you say 'we', do you mean yourself, Myrtle and George? You knew each other in New York?"

"Sure. It suited us to come here."

"I heard there was a big robbery of a security van that in some way caused the falling-out between Butch and Gritty Bologna."

His mouth tightened. "You seem to know a lot about it."

She felt herself color a little. "It was in the papers at the time. I looked it up later after I heard who Myrtle's husband had been. I was curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Edward said and ended that line of conversation. It wasn't one of Butch's sayings.

"Well, thanks for the meal. I really enjoyed it," Tanya said a few minutes

later.

“Let’s do it again tomorrow,” Edward said, and it was music to her ears.

“Why not? And I’ll pay.” She could afford to, now she was dealing in first edition Agatha Christies. She’d get him talking again after a few drinks, no problem.

Her mention of the robbery hadn’t put him off entirely, she was pleased to discover. And now Edward played the assertive male. “This afternoon I’m gonna check the filing cabinet.”

“There’s no need. It was locked,” she said.

“Some of my coffee could have seeped inside. I’ll take a look.”

“What in the name of sanity is Edward up to?” George asked Myrtle later that week. “I saw them leaving Jimmy’s at lunch today. It’s become a regular date.”

“He’s keeping her sweet, I figure,” Myrtle said. “We encouraged him, if you remember.”

“That was when we needed the credit card with Robert’s signature. He found an old receipt book full of Robert’s signatures in the filing cabinet, but that was three days ago. He handed it to me and it’s all I want. His work is done. He has no reason to be lunching with Tanya every day.”

“Silly old fool,” Myrtle said. “He stands no chance with her. Smart clothes can only do so much for a guy. God help him when he takes them off.”

“Is that one of Butch’s sayings?”

“No. I said it.”

“I’m worried, Myrtle.” George showed the stress he was under by pulling the end of his silver ponytail across his throat. “We don’t want him telling her anything.”

“About this?”

“No—about the heist of the van.”

“She isn’t interested in that. She has too much on her mind, and soon she’ll have a whole lot more. How’s the project going?”

“My part is complete,” George said, reaching into his pocket. “It’s over to you now.”

“Fine,” Myrtle said. “I’ll plant the little beauty tomorrow lunchtime, while Edward is working his charm on her in Jimmy’s.”

“I was thinking,” Tanya said, at the next lunch date.

“Yeah?” Edward had already finished the bottle of Chablis and was on Bourbon. His glazed eyes looked ready for a cataract operation.

“About Robert,” she went on, “and how you three linked up with him. Was he ever in New York?”

“Sure,” he said, with a flap of the hand, “but way back, when we were all much younger.”

“In Butch Rafferty’s gang?”

“I wouldn’t say Robert was in the gang,” he said, starting to slur the words, “but we all knew him. He was a bartender then, some place in the Bowery where we used to meet.”

“Someone you trusted?”

“Right on. Like one of the family.”

“Butch’s family?”

“Yeah. Butch liked the guy and so did the rest of us. Robert knew how to keep his mouth shut. Jobs were discussed. It didn’t matter.”

“A bartender in New York? That’s a far cry from owning a bookshop.”

“He had a dream to get out of town and open a bookstore and that’s what he did when he had the money.”

“Just from his work in the bar?” she said, disbelieving.

“Butch helped him. Butch was like that. And it wasn’t wasted. Butch knew if he ever needed a bolt-hole he could lay up for a while here in Poketown, Pennsylvania.” He shook his head slowly. “Too bad he was shot before he had the chance.”

Tanya knew all this, but there was more she didn’t know. “So after Butch was killed, some of you left town and came here?”

He nodded. “Myrtle’s idea. She knew where Robert had set up shop.”

“Was she an active member of the gang?”

“She didn’t go on jobs, but she has a good brain and she’s cool. She helped Butch with the planning.” He blinked and looked sober for a second. “You’re not an undercover cop, by any chance?”

She laughed. “No way. I’m starstruck by how you guys operate.”

Reassured, he reached for the Bourbon and topped up his glass. “Sexy, huh?”

“It’s a turn-on. I’ll say that.”

“You’re a turn-on without saying a word.”

“Flatterer.” She was still on her first glass of wine, picking her questions judiciously. The process required care, even with a half-cut would-be seducer like this one. The query about the undercover cop was a warning. Edward couldn’t have been more wrong, but it would be a mistake to underestimate him. “What is it with the Friends of England? Is that the only way you can meet in private?”

“We could meet anywhere. It’s a free country.”

“Be mysterious, then,” she said, smiling.

He grinned back. “You bet I will. There’s gotta be mystery in a relationship.”

“Who said anything about …” She didn’t get any further. His hand was on her thigh.

She’d got him just as she wanted.

He needed support as he tottered back to Precious Finds and Tanya supplied it, allowing him to put his arm around her shoulder.

“Why don’t we close the shop for the afternoon?” he said.

“What a good idea,” she said. “I was thinking the same thing.” She’d already closed for lunch and didn’t have to reopen. She let them inside, fastened the bolts and left the closed notice hanging on the door.

Inside, she said, “After all that wine, some coffee might be a good plan.”

“I can think of a better one,” Edward said, reaching for her breasts.

She swayed out of range. “Coffee first. I only have instant, but I’m not sending you to Starbucks again. Tell you what. I’ll make it here and we’ll carry it through to the back room, so we can both have a chair.”

“And if I spill it, I can’t do so much damage,” he said with a grin.

She carried both mugs through the shop after the coffee was made, insisting he went ahead. She didn’t want him behind her.

Edward managed to lift two chairs from the stack in the back room and sank

into one of them. “Never thought I’d get to be alone with you.”

And so drunk you can’t do anything about it, Tanya thought, but she said, “Yes, it’s great to relax. And in the company of a famous New York mobster.”

He looked stupidly flattered.

“I’d love to hear about the last big job you did—the security van,” she said. “I thought they were so well protected no robber would even think about a hold-up.”

“Takes brains,” he said.

“Was it your idea, then?”

“The part that worked, yeah.” He ogled her. “You wanna hear about it? I’ll tell you. In a job like this you go for the weak spot. You know what that is?”

“The tires?”

“The people. You surprise the guard in his own home, before he reports for work. You tell him his mother has been kidnapped and he has to cooperate. You tape dummy explosives to his chest and tell him you can detonate them by remote whenever you want.”

“Brilliant,” Tanya said. “Was that you, doing all that?”

“Most of it. From there on, he’s so scared he’ll do anything. He drives you to where the vans are kept. You’re wearing a uniform just like his. He drives the security van to the depot where the bank stores the money. He does the talking and you help load the van.”

“How much? Squillions?” She was wide-eyed, playing the innocent.

“They don’t deal in peanuts,” Edward said. “And when you’re outta there and on the street, your buddies follow in the transit van.”

“George?”

“He was one of the bunch, yeah. Some were Butch’s people and some worked for Gritty Bologna. Gritty had a line into the security outfit, which was how we got the uniform and the guard’s address. You drive to the warehouse where you transfer the loot and that’s it.”

“What about the guard?”

“Tied up and locked in his van. No violence.”

“How much did you get?”

“Just under a million pounds.”

“Pounds?”

Edward looked sheepish. “Yeah. We screwed up. We thought this van was delivering to the major banks like all the others. Too bad we picked the one supplying British money to currency exchanges at all the major airports in New York.”

“You had a vanload of useless money.”

“Uh huh. Crisp, new banknotes for tourists to take on their vacations.”

“What a letdown.”

“Tell me about it. Gritty went bananas. He blamed Butch. There was a shootout and Butch was the loser. Some of us figured Gritty wouldn’t stop at one killing, so we left town.”

“You and George and Myrtle?” She’d been incredibly patient waiting for the pay-off.

“Myrtle remembered Robert here in Poketown, and this is where we came.”

“With the pounds?”

“With the pounds. I figured we might think of a way to use them. It took a while, but with Robert’s help we worked it.”

“All those trips to England? That’s neat.”

“Twenty, thirty grand at a time. Some notes we exchange and bring dollars back. Some we spent over there. It’s small scale. Has to be, with new, numbered bank-notes.”

“And this is why you call it the Friends of England? I love it!” She clapped her hands. “Edward, you’re a genius. Is there any left, or is it all spent?”

“More than half is left.”

“Who’s got it?”

“It’s right here in the safe. That’s why we can’t let the place close.”

He was losing her now.

“I haven’t found the safe,” she said as casually as if she was talking about the one copy of Jane Austen the shop didn’t stock. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He just smiled.

“When you say ‘right here’ do you mean the back room?”

He wagged his finger like a parent with a fractious infant. “Secret.”

Infuriating. To her best knowledge there wasn’t a safe on the premises. Robert had always left the takings in the till. There wasn’t enough to justify using a safe. She gathered herself and gave Edward a smoldering look.“If that’s how you want to play this, I won’t be showing you my secret either.”

“Whassat?” he asked, gripping the chair-arms.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, naughty boy.”

She watched the struggle taking place in front of her, rampant desire taking over from reality. “You gotta do better than that,” he said.

“Okay. To show you my secret we have to go upstairs, to the bedroom.”

“Hell,” he said, shifting in the chair as if he was suddenly uncomfortable.“Is that an offer?”

She hesitated, then gave a nod.

He groomed his moustache with finger and thumb and took a deep, tremulous breath. “The safe is right where you are. You could touch it with your knee.”

She looked down. “Get away.”

“The Encyclopedia Brit … Brit …” He couldn’t complete the word.

“Britannica?”

“Middle five volumes. False front.”

She stooped and studied the spines of the large books that took up the whole of the bottom shelf. With their faded lettering and scuffed cloth bindings they looked no different from the others.

“1911 edition,” Edward said. “Green. Press that showy gold bit on volume twelve and see what happens.”

She pressed her thumb against the royal coat of arms and felt it respond. Just as Edward had said, the five spines were only a façade attached to a small, hinged door that sprang open and revealed the gray metal front of a safe with a circular combination lock.

Eureka.

“That’s amazing.”

“If I could see straight, I’d open it for you,” he said, “but there’s only stacks of notes in there.”

“You have to know the combination.”

“Zero-four-two-three-one-nine-six-four, but I didn’t tell you that, okay?”

“Smart. How do you remember?”

“It’s Myrtle’s birthday. April twenty-three, sixty-four. Shut it now and we’ll go upstairs.”

In his inebriated state, he couldn’t have stopped her if she’d walked out and left him there. But, hell, she wanted the satisfaction of showing him her secret, as she’d put it.

“Will you make it?”

He chuckled. “You bet I will, baby.” And he did, even though he took the last few stairs on all fours. “So which one is the bedroom?” he asked between deep breaths.

“That’s another adventure, loverboy. Next floor.”

“Stuff that. There must be a sofa right here.”

Tanya shook her head and pointed her finger at the ceiling.

After some hesitation Edward seemed to accept that this had to be on Tanya’s terms. “Which way, then?”

“The spiral staircase at the end of the corridor.”

Gamely, he stepped towards it and hauled himself to the top. “Makes you kind of dizzy.”

“That’s not the fault of the staircase.” She pushed open a door. “In here, buster.”

Robert’s bedroom matched the size of the back room downstairs. It overlooked the yard at the rear of the property so it was built over the same foundations. The king-size bed was constructed of oak, with headboard and footboard graciously curved and upholstered in a French empire style. All the furniture matched and there was plenty of it, dressing table, ward-robes, chests of drawers and easy chairs, but no sense of crowding. More books lined the facing wall and there was a fifty-inch plasma TV as well as a sound system with chest-high speakers. There was an open door to an *en suite* shower room. A second door connected to a fire escape.

“This’ll do,” Edward said, stepping towards Tanya.

She moved aside. “Not so fast.”

“C’mon, I showed you *my* secret.” He patted the bed.

“Fair enough. Here’s mine.” She crossed to the dressing-table, swung the mirror right over and revealed a manila envelope fastened to the back. “It’s ridiculous. I checked the mirror a week ago, and nothing was there. This morning I found this. Robert’s will.”

“Yeah?” he said, his thoughts elsewhere.

“You’d better listen up, because it names you.” She slipped the document from the envelope and started to read.“‘This is the last will and testament of Robert Ripple, of Precious Finds Bookshop, Main Street, Poketown, Pennsylvania, being of sound mind and revoking all other wills and codicils. I wish to appoint as co-executors my good friends George Digby-Smith and Edward Myers.’ That’s you. Unfortunately as an executor you’re not allowed to profit from the estate.”

“No problem,” Edward said. “Now why don’t you put that down so we can

give this bed a workout?”

“Listen to this part: ‘I leave my house and shop in trust to become the sole property of my devoted assistant manager, Tanya Tripp, on condition that she continues to trade as a bookseller on the premises for ten years from the date of my decease.’ Nice try.”

“Don’t ya like it?” Edward said, frowning.

“It stinks. This wasn’t drafted by Robert. It’s a fake. I know why you wanted his credit cards the other day and why in the end you walked off with that old receipt book. So you could fake his signature. Well, it’s a passable signature, I’ll give you that, but you forgot something. A will needs to be witnessed. There are no witnesses here.”

“No witnesses, huh?” He raised his right hand in a semi-official pose and intoned in a more-or-less coherent manner, “The state of Pennsylvania doesn’t require witnesses to a will. You’re in the clear, sweetheart. It’s all yours, the house and the shop. Just be grateful someone thought of you.”

“Thought of *me*? You were only thinking of yourselves, keeping up the old arrangement, taking your stolen pounds from the safe and spending them in England. I’m supposed to give up ten years of my life to keep this smelly old heap of wood and plaster going just to make life dandy for you guys. Well, forget it. I don’t buy it.” She held the will high and ripped it apart.

The force of the action somehow penetrated the alcohol in Edward’s brain. Suddenly he seemed to realize that there was much more at stake than getting this young woman into bed. “I’ve got your number. You figure you can do better for yourself with those Agatha Christies you have in the office. Worth a fucking fortune, you said. Few spots of coffee didn’t harm them much. You’re aiming to take them with you when the shop closes down and cash in big time.”

Tanya felt the blood drain from her face. She’d been hoping her agitated words the other day had passed unnoticed. This was dangerous, desperately dangerous. It wasn’t quite true because the best books weren’t stained. They were safe in her apartment. Even so, this stupid, drink-crazed man could put a stop to everything.

She still had ammunition and her reaction was to use it. “You don’t know who I am. I can bring down you and your thieving friends. I’m Gritty Bologna’s daughter, Teresa. That money in the safe isn’t yours to spend. We spent years tracking you to this place. I took the job with Robert to find out where the banknotes are and now I know.”

“You’re Teresa Bologna?” he said in amazement. “You were in school at the time of the heist.”

“I’m family, and family doesn’t give up.”

He moved fast for a drunk. Fear and rage mingled in his face. He came at her like a bull.

He was blocking her route to the door and the *en suite* would be a trap. Her only option was to use the fire escape. She turned and hit the panic bar and the door swung open. She grabbed the rail and swung left just as Edward charged through.

No one’s movements are reliable after heavy drinking. Edward pitched forward, failed to stop, hit the rail hard with his hips and couldn’t stop his torso from tipping him over. He may have screamed. Tanya (or Teresa) didn’t

remember. But the sickening thud of the body hitting the concrete forty feet below would stay in her memory forever.

The autopsy revealed substantial alcohol in Edward's blood. No one could say what he had been doing above the bookshop in the dead owner's bedroom. Those who might have thrown some light had all left Poketown overnight and were not heard of again. So an open verdict was returned at the inquest.

In the absence of a will from Robert Ripple, Precious Finds was duly put under the control of an administrator and escheated to the state of Pennsylvania. It ceased trading as a bookshop and was converted into apartments.

About a year later, a married couple set up home on a remote Scottish island. He was thought to be an ex-hippy, she an American. They called themselves Mr. and Mrs. English and they helped the home tourist industry by forever taking holidays in different towns.

Copies of several rare Agatha Christie first editions in dust jackets enlivened the book market in the years that followed, changing hands for huge sums. Their provenance was described as uncertain, but they were certainly genuine.

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Cover design by Neil Alexander Heacox

978-1-4532-0635-5

Published in 2014 by MysteriousPress.com/Open Road Integrated Media, Inc.
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New York, NY 10014
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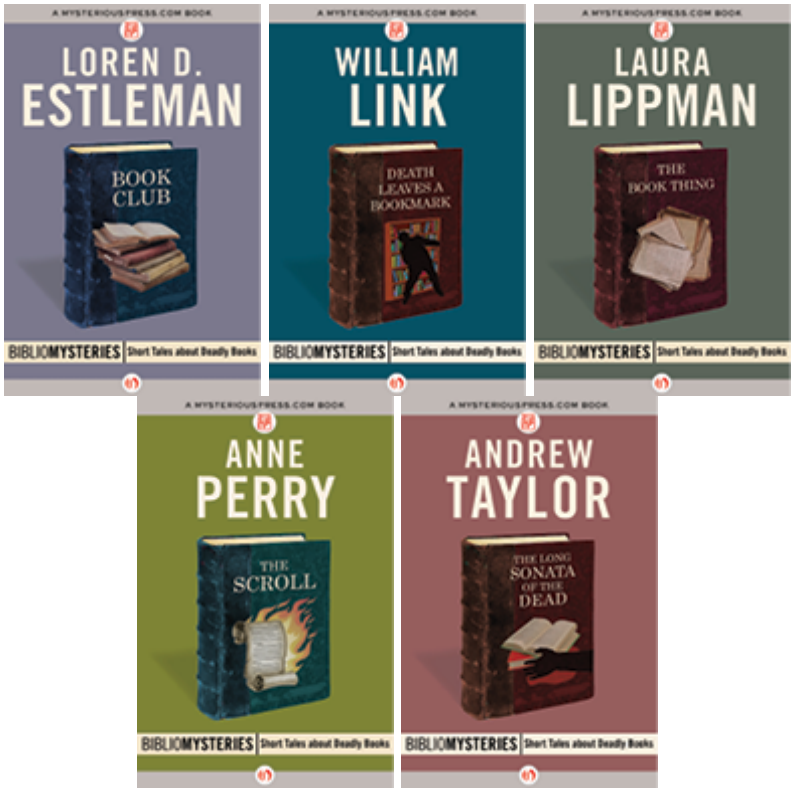

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